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"I am Another": Echoes of Keatsian Negative Capability in the Poetry of Jibanananda Das

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Abstract

This article attempts to study the influence of the Romantic poet John Keats on the twentieth-century Vernacular poet Jibanananda Das with particular focus on the Keatsian conception of negative capability and its echoes in Jibanananda's poetry. While the influence of Keats on Jibanananda is well-known and extends to various aspects such as the perception of Nature, historicity, and thematic resemblances in representing pain, death and Beauty, the concept of negative capability finds its own, albeit indeliberate, way with Jibanananda and lends his poetry a unique dimension which complements the modernist sensibility. Beginning with a short introduction to Jibanananda and Keats and a note on the Romantic note in the former's poetry, the article will move on to discuss Keats's concept of negative capability and its manifestation in his own poetic works. The last part of the article shall cover Jibanananda's own display of negative capability in his poems and its complementation of modernism as a consequence of Jibanananda's unique assimilation of influence.

Keywords: John Keats, Negative capability, Jibanananda Das, Reception, Influence

Introduction

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) was a Bengali poet, writer, novelist, and essayist in the Bengali language. He has emerged as one of the greatest Bengali poets after Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam in West Bengal and Bangladesh. A group of Bengali poets-

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Sudhindranath Dutt, Buddhadeva Bose, Amiya Chakraborty, and Bishnu Dey, who wrote between the 1930s and the 1950s were inspired by Western literary modernism and its various offshoots. Jibanananda Das, a lecturer in English, was the prominent of this group. He created a new poetic voice in Vernacular Literature where the natural beauty of the rural landscape of Bengal co-exists with his poetic sensibilities with the urban realities of the city of Kolkata. He affectionately addresses rural Bengal as 'Bengal, the Beautiful" and the city of Kolkata as "Kallolini Tillotama" (sonorous feminine beauty). His particular style of uneven rhythm, startling metaphors, and unique images have influenced generations of Bengali poets such as "the Krittibas" and "Hungry Generation" poets. His major volumes of poetry include Dhusar PandulipGrey Manuscripts, Bonolota Sen, Satti Tarar Timir (The Darkness of the Seven Stars), Mahaprithibi (The Wide World), and Bengal The Beautiful (Rupashi Bangla) (published Posthumously).

The inherent paradoxes of existence which are inseparably linked find an echo as an important theme in the poems of both John Keats (1795-1821) and Jibanananda Das (1899-1954). Douglas Bush observes that Keats's poems are linked by certain inherent conflicts – between pain and pleasure ("Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn"), love and pain ("La Belle Dame Sans Merci"), and pain and death ("Isabella"). Among the Romantic poets, he notes, Keats alone "consciously strove to escape from self-expression into Shakespearean impersonality" (89-90). Keats considered that poetry should not have "a palpable design upon us" (*Letters* 88); it should be unobtrusive, something that the reader can accept with all its mystery. Poetry, he recommends, should be the outcome of "negative capability" which "is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts", and is free of "any irritable reaching out after fact and reason" (60). This is in tune with Jibanananda's observation in "Keno Likhi" ("Why I Write"): "Poetry does not have any responsibilities. The poet does not have to follow any directions" (*Samagra Prabandha* 383). The Romantic note in Jibanananda's poetry is manifested mainly in some poems in his early years in *Jhora Palok* (*Fallen Feathers*, 1927) and almost entirely in the sonnets of the posthumously published *Rupashi Bangla* (*Bengal the Beautiful*, 1957); on the other hand, the anti-Romantic vein in his modernist urban poetry was inevitable as a product of his times, where a desire to stand apart from the Tagorean legacy and the incursion of modernist sensibilities into the poetic scenario – with poets such as Buddhadeva Bose (1908-1974), Amiya Chakraborty (1901-1986), Sudhindranath Dutt (1901-1960) and Bishnu Dey (1909-1982) on the rise, besides Jibanananda himself – was well under way. However, just as the influences of other literary schools/stalwarts found their own way with Jibanananda, so did that of the Romantic Keats – an influence which, besides other aspects, included the famous Keatsian concept of *negative capability* which is seen to discover its own dimension in the context of Jibanananda's poetic career and sensibilities.

1.1 "Away! Away! For I Will Fly to Thee": Keats's Case of Negative Capability

"Keats's characteristic self-dismissal", William Walsh notes, "added strength to Keats as a poet – to be considered expressly." His ability of self-analysis, as seen in his Letters, "is of a detached and clinical sort uncolored by prejudice, touchiness, or self-love" (65). The letters, especially those written to Benjamin Bailey, Richard Woodhouse and John Hamilton Reynolds provide an insight into his deliberations on the 'poetic negation of the self.' However, the term under discussion appears first – and last – in Keats's letter to his brothers George and Tom, dated December 22, 1817, where Keats discusses his getting into a 'disquisition' with his friend Charles Wentworth Dilke on several subjects while returning from the Christmas pantomime:

> Several things dovetailed my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability,* that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. (*Letters* 60)

It is, perhaps, entirely characteristic of Keats that he should come up with one of his most telling phrases – negative capability – in such an impromptu fashion without preamble or lengthy explanation. The term, richly suggestive, can be defined as the human capacity to remain open to and receptive to the ideas and experiences of the world. On the other hand, it importantly describes the capacity to suspend especially the foundational certainty of identity. In short, it describes a poetic capacity to efface one's own mental identity by immersing it sympathetically and spontaneously within the subject described. Keats uses the word 'negative' not in a pejorative sense, but to convey the idea that a person's potential can be defined by what he or she does not possess which is essential to literary achievement, Keats argues, is a certain passivity, a willingness to let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that. Keats ends his brief discussion on negative capability by concluding that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (*Letters* 61). Keats never repeated the phrase 'negative capability' in his letters. But it is prefigured in a slightly earlier letter written to Bailey on 22 November 1817, in which Keats observes:

> I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by conquisitive reasoning – and yet it must be. Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside from numerous objections? However, it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! (Letters 54)

Keats touched again on the idea of the passivity, humility even, of a great writer, in a letter he wrote to Woodhouse on 27 October 1818. The 'poetical Character', Keats maintained,

> is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion poet. (*Letters* 194-95)

A poet, he told Woodhouse, "has no Identity; he is continually in for and filling some other Body" (195). In Keats's Odes, we see these ideas find their fullest expression. Keats in the Odes seems to lose his own identity in total identification with the object he contemplates; under the richly sensuous surface, we find Keats's presentation of all experience as a tangle of inseparable but fundamental opposites – melancholy in delight and pleasure in pain, inclining equally towards a life of indolence and sensation and towards another of thought and awareness of both the attraction of a dream-world without disagreeables and the remorseless presence of the actual. In Stanza 4 of "Ode to a Nightingale" for example, Keats describes his wishes to "fly" (31), declaring that the "viewless wings of Poesy" (33) will be the vehicle of his transcendence. He further realizes that he is, in fact, "already with [the nightingale]" (35). Once he can identify his "dull brain" (34) as an impediment to his perception of a varied, complex reality, the poet demonstrates negative capability – the ability to perceive and experience the joy of the nightingale. In "To Autumn", too, the deliberate hazing of the position of the poet in the poem is evident as subjective identification with autumn occurs.

Negative capability is closely related to the ability to perceive Beauty. In "Ode to a Grecian Urn", the urn enshrines for eternity two scenes from the pastoral golden age of Greece – the piping fair youth beneath the trees and the people leading the heifer to the sacrifice. The fair youth's love achieves a timeless poised perfection which our human Life does not allow: "For ever will thou love, and she be fair!" (20) The poem, in its end, rings out, 'Beauty is truth, truth Beauty" (49). With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration - the camelion poet who delights in the creation of an Iago as well as an Imogen can create the same kind of delight in the reader who is made to perceive Beauty even in suffering and ugliness; anything seen or felt with intensity has to be beautiful and true to that very intensity.

1.2 "You and I, O Sea Crane, Just A Moment or Two": Negative Capability in Jibanananda's Poetic Sensibilities

While Jibanananda never used the phrase 'negative capability' directly, he was well-acquainted with the works of Keats, as is evident from the numerous quotations from his poems and an entire critical piece in *Dinlipi*, his literary notes. In "Kabitar Katha" ("Of Poetry") and "Keno Likhi", he echoes the transforming power of imagination through 'kalpana-manisha' ('imaginative sensibility') and 'kalpana-pratibha' ('imaginative capability'). There are two ways in which Jibanananda's capability echoes Keats's – one by being open to 'mystery and doubt' and the other by losing one's identity in the process of assuming multiple identities. This is embodied by several major poems, including but not limited to "Bodh" ("A Certain Sense"), "Camp-e" ("At the Camp") and "Aat Bochhor Aager Ekdin" ("One Day Eight Years Ago'). In "Bodh", the very nature of the sensation remains a mystery, undefined and unresolved:

> Into the half-light and shadow I go – within my head
> Not a dream – but some sensation is at work!
> Not a dream – not peace – not love,
> Inside my heart a sensation is born! (1-4, trans. Seely, *Doe in Heat* 120)

Exactness is avoided, thereby clearly creating a sensation of mystery. In "Aat Bochhor Aager Ekdin", too, the position of the poet/narrator is fluid and mysterious as the poem begins as a reportage: "We heard he had been taken to the morgue" (1). The poem later reveals:

> He felt the desire to die.
> His wife lay by his side – his child as well.
> There was love and hope – yet in the moonlight
> What ghost did he see? Why was his sleep broken? (5-8, trans. Chaudhuri)

Again, no reason is given for his sudden death, nor any idea about the nature of the 'ghost' that he sees. Using symbols like the owl and the mouse only heightens the mystery. Jibanananda, in his minute description of the dead man's family, his situation at the morgue, and the quick changes in positions of narration and reflection leaves the reader bewildered as to the identity of the poet.

To come to the second point, Jibanananda's poetry is replete with his ability to lose identity in a bid to identify – ranging from birds to beggars and even the grass. In several poems of *Rupashi Bangla*, Jibanananda yearns to identify with birds – a Keatsian vein as well as variation in its own right. The disappearance into the forms and consciousness of the birds of Bengal, while echoing Keats's nightingale, "links Jibanananda with the broader traditions of Indian poetry, celebrating the desire to live and to be remembered through several births" (Das xvi). Repeated mention of the birds of the world and immortal birds take place in several of Jibanananda's poems. There are poems where Jibanananda merely identifies; in others, he makes a distinction between birds of the earth and immortal birds. Similar to Keats, there is

an identification, but it is not broken suddenly; there is, rather, a distinction between the two sets from the very beginning:

A wild duck spreads its wings – I hear the swishing sound,
One – two – three – four – numberless – endless –

\- - -

Imaginary ducks all – once the world's sound and colour is erased
Let them fly, in the silent moonlight of the heart. ("Buno Haans" 3-4, 11-12, trans. Seely, *Doe in Heat* 283-84)

"Imaginary ducks all" here echoes Keats's 'forlorn'. There is, however, a clear mention that the birds are imaginary; therefore, there is so sudden conspicuous break back to reality like Keats.

The capability of modernist poetry to explore the Baudelairean aesthetics of the 'not beautiful' per se finds its own dimension in Jibanananda's poetry. Jibanananda's close proximity with the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire and the Symbolists led him to develop his poetry away from the terms of hard-defined beauty and in close contact with the ugly, the grotesque, the drab and the macabre. It is, therefore, not altogether unusual that Jibanananda's expression of negative capability does not stick to the 'purely' beautiful but goes instead to suggestive extents as is characteristic of as well as unique in twentieth-century Bengali poetry. The 'immortal bird' is not always Keats's nightingale, but also the vulture – the drab scavenger and overseer of urban life. In "Shakun" ("Vultures"), Jibanananda notes:

Great dark wings on the palm-trees – on mountain peaks
Now, grazing at earth's beauty – how from the Arabian sea
Ships flock to the dark port; or to tender Malabar now-
They fly – around a tower's sad cornice, many vultures
Seem as though passed beyond some death, earth's birds forgotten. (8-12, trans. Haldar)

This combines uniquely the exotic with the mysterious modernist acceptance of 'some death' which the vultures have passed beyond, unlike the Keatsian hailing of the nightingale as 'immortal bird'; however, the vultures have passed beyond this death and the distinction ifrom 'earth's birds' is, therefore, unmistakable.

Conclusion

The unique transmutation of influence is a hallmark of Jibanananda's poetry. His own assimilation of Keats, therefore, does not confine him to the hard-and-fast status of a 'forlorn' Romantic, nor does it contest outright the modernist experience: the result is a unique discourse that duly complements the Keatsian echo, where "I have seen flying insects play so often in the golden waves of sunlight" ("Aat Bochhor Aager Ekdin" 29) can effortlessly succeed "The flies buzz off again from their seats in the gloomy blood" (28). It is in this regard that the Keatsian case of negative capability finds its own cause in Jibanananda Das.

***Declaration**: The title of the paper is inspired by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud's phrase "I is another" (originally "Je est un autre"). This comes from a letter he wrote in 1871, in which he explores the nature of identity and the self which are always in a state of change.*

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